

## **Tomb Structure and Burial Customs among the Turkish Peoples on the Silk Road**

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Among the early Turkish societies inhabiting the lands just to the north of the historic Chinese territories, attitudes and beliefs concerning death motivated the construction of many tombs and mausoleums of interest to art historians today. Where the typology of funerary structures is concerned we find *kurgans* (tumuli) in both Inner and Central Asia, sixth century Göktürk burial complexes, tomb stones with figurative carving, stone statues representing the dead erected over the graves, statues of rams and horses, *kimbets* and *türbes*, as well as burial and mourning ceremonies stretching from the easternmost end of the Silk Road as far as Anatolia, and beyond into the Balkans.

Funerary architecture has been enriched as a result of the Turkish adherence to the cult of ancestor worship. From the earliest periods of history Turkish societies paid respect to individuals who had performed beneficial services for the state, rulers known as *kağans* who had conquered new lands, military commanders, and wives of *kağans*. Constructing monumental tombs was a way of expressing thanks to those to whom the society was indebted, and strongly embedded in social custom. These funerary monuments are found scattered along the Silk Road from the Chinese border as far as Anatolia. In the historic context no other people has had the opportunity to disseminate monuments over such a vast area.

In the earliest times when the Silk Road was just becoming a major trade route, the Turks living on China's northern borders were leading semi-nomadic lives, moving between summer pastures and winter settlements. The Turkish people of these regions lived in cylindrical tents with dome like roofs which were easily put up and dismantled, and light to carry from place to place. The most ancient type of Turkish dwelling, these tents known as *öy* or *üy* are still in use today in many regions along the Silk Road.

Most of the tombs in the lands stretching from the Tokmak region of Kirgizstan and the area north of Lake Issyk in Kazakhstan eastwards to the Chinese border can be seen to resemble the tents known as *öy* or *üy* in form. Inside the tent-shaped tomb are the gravestone and an earth mound beneath which the dead person is buried. Over the metal framed tents is a finial sometimes in the form of a crescent, sometimes a star, and sometimes both crescent and

star. A thin layer of plaster is applied over the metal frame of the tent tomb to suggest the felt covering of a real timber framed tent.

In time this plaster layer over the metal frame gets eroded away, revealing the bare metal frame. Since the influence of Islam is strong in those regions of Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan bordering Uzbekistan, this type of tomb reflecting pre-Islamic Turkish tradition is rare here. Nevertheless in these regions of Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan burial ceremonies and mourning customs (*yoğ aş*) dating from the sixth to eighth century Göktürk period still continue.

Today among the Kirgiz when a person dies a tent known as a *boz üy* is erected in the garden of his house. No articles are placed inside, and in keeping with the concept of mourning the tent is bereft of the colourful patterned and embroidered cloths, carpets and felts which would normally adorn it. The dead person is laid inside on a large bed of straw, fragrant herbs and leaves, and covered by a white cloth. The body is subsequently buried in a coffin or shroud. Before burial the body lies in the tent for two or three days, during which time only close relatives enter. Friends and neighbors who come to offer their condolences remain outside the tent. Inside two felt rugs are spread on the floor for family members to sit on, and those attending the mourning ceremony or, *yoğ aş* weep around the tent door. If the dead person is a man the mourners cry louder, the ceremony for women being quieter and simpler. As the mourners move around the tent they recite laments known as *koşok*. No funeral feast is given while the body is in the tent, because lighting a fire is forbidden. Feasts are given on the third, seventh and fortieth days after the death and horses slaughtered for the occasion. Today horses which have outlived their useful lives are picked for slaughter. Until a century or so ago, if the dead person was a man of wealth, a standard bearing the symbol of his clan or tribe would be flown over the tent. This standard was known as *buncuk*.

Chinese sources provide detailed accounts of Göktürk burial ceremonies during the sixth to eighth centuries. A Tang chronicle gives the following description of a burial ceremony which took place in the sixth century: "They place the body in a tent, and the man's sons, grandsons, and other kinsmen whether man or woman sacrifice horses and sheep and spread them before the tent. They ride around the tent seven times on horseback. They cut their faces with knives and weep at the tent door. Mixed blood and tears run down their faces. They repeat this ceremony seven times. Then on a certain day they bury the body with his horse and all personal objects which he used, or burn him on a pyre. If the body is burned they

bury the ashes in his tomb on a particular day of the year. They bury those who have died in summer in autumn, when the grass and leaves turn brown, and those who die in winter they bury in spring when the flowers bloom and the snows have melted. On the burial day the kinsmen of the dead person ride around on horseback, cut their faces and cry, just as they did on the day of death. They paint pictures of the dead man and the battles in which he fought on the walls of the structure erected over the grave. If the dead person has killed a man during his life they place a stone over his grave. Sometimes these stones amount to one hundred or even one thousand. After sacrificing horses and sheep they place the heads on stakes.”

The burial ceremonies of the Turkish Oğuz tribes in the ninth century are very similar, as we see from a description by Ibn Fadlan.

The fourteenth century Ottoman sultan Murad I was killed by a Serbian soldier named Milos Oblovich while surveying the battle field following the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. A tent was immediately erected over his body, which was embalmed by army surgeons. The sultan’s internal organs were buried there inside a gold basin. Another tent was erected over this spot until a stone tomb could be constructed in its place. The embalmed body of Murad I was brought to Bursa and buried in a tomb next to an *imaret* or almshouse which he had built in the district of Çekirge.

The bodies of important Turkish figures that died in foreign lands were always embalmed and transported back to their homeland. When Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent died of natural causes during the Sigetvar campaign, he too was embalmed and his internal organs buried in gold basins at the place where he died. Again a tent was erected over this grave until a stone tomb could be built. His embalmed body was brought back to Istanbul and buried in his tomb at Süleymaniye Mosque. A miniature painting in the Süleymanname manuscript in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin depicts a tent and a grave being dug in its shadow.

All these examples illustrate that the tent was the first Turkish tomb structure, and in time was transformed into a similar stone structure with a cylindrical form and dome-like roof. In short the architecture of the *kümbet* and *türbe* of the Islamic period originated in the tent known as *öy* or *üy* in Central Asia and as *topak ev* in Anatolia, where it is found in many regions.

Despite the passage of long centuries, and the conversion of various Turkish communities to several different religions over that long time span, the funerary customs of the Turkish clans survived along the thousands of kilometres of the Silk Road, from Inner and Central Asia to Anatolia, and westwards into the Balkans. The way in which customs were loyally preserved through so many changes until Ottoman times is due to the rich cultural structure and dynamism linking the peoples along the Silk Road.